

Sophister Module Description Template 2026-27

Full Name: The Literature of Eating

Short Name: Food Writing

Lecturer Names and Email Addresses: This module will be co-taught by Dr Margaret Robson: robsonm@tcd.ie; and Dr Dara Downey: downeyda@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester Taught: HT

Assessment Details: One 1,500 word reflection; One 3,500 word essay: assessment submission dates to be confirmed.

Year: JS

Module Content:

Learning eating is learning culture.

Throughout history the consumption of food has occupied the bulk of human labour: growing, rearing, producing, trading, cooking and serving food is fundamentally about our essential need for nourishment. But our need for food goes far beyond the functional, through the emotional, the civic, the political, invoking all the senses, taste, smell, sight, hearing and touch.

From foods that are proscribed, or proscribed at certain times, through to table etiquette, we learn how to handle food and the protocols of eating according to ideas of human hierarchies and values.

Food is also, though, a political tool whereby peoples can be controlled through food distribution practices. Famines may begin as a consequence of natural occurrences, natural disasters, but the civic response to it can be a means of wiping out dissent, ethnic groups, or whole peoples.

On an individual level people may adopt food practices to satisfy religious or political ends.

Hunger can be a form of communication: where the individual denies themselves food, the audience for such an act is sent a very clear message, the hunger striker's refusal to be part of the body politic, the religious person's denial of the body prefiguring a union with God.

Feasting and fasting provide the poles of display wherein food may be a means of 'soft' power: state banquets, lavish weddings, the food and the tableware and the sense of occasion dazzle the guests, reinforcing the host's social status, wealth and power.

In this course we will look at literary representations of aspects of food culture.

The topics to be covered include the following:

Cannibalism; institutional food; eating children/children eating; food as social control; food in Dickens; the politics of fasting; food and gender; the technology of food production; famines and starvation; the hunger artists; the sacred meal; what you eat on your travels.

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of the course students will be familiar with the cultural importance of food.

Students will gain an understanding of the ways in which food is used in and by literary texts.

Students will be able to offer critical and theoretical interpretations of the role and meaning of food in literature and culture

Learning Aims:

This course aims to show the ways in which food is used to represent culture: from 'unclean' eating, to structuring society through discriminatory food practices, our everyday needs are codified to show our place in society through what and how we eat.

Preliminary Reading List:

Food and Culture: A Reader

Eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik

(Routledge, New York, 2013)

Hunger: An Unnatural History

Sharman Apt Russell

(New York, 2005)

Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature

Carolyn Daniel

(Routledge, 2006)

Consuming Agency in Fairy Tales, Childlore and Folk Literature

Susan Honeyman

(Routledge, 2010)

Eating Words: A Norton Anthology of Food Writing

(New York, 2016)

From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Incorporation

Maggie Kilgour

(Princeton UP, 1990)

The Food Plot in the Nineteenth Century British Novel

Michael P. Lee

(Palgrave, 2016)

The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Deborah Blum

(Penguin, 2018)

Modernism and Food Studies: Politics, Aesthetics, and the Avant-Garde

Eds Jessica Martell, Adam Fajardo, Philip Keel Geheber

(University Press of Florida, 2019)

Please note:

- Curricular information is subject to change.
- Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.